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AUTHOR Fang, Wei Li; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Although the University of Virginia is a state-supported institution, only eight percent of the students are black and less than one percent of the faculty are black. During the summer of 1986, an ad hoc committee of students, faculty, and administrators was formed, with the goal of increasing racial and multi-cultural awareness and improving race relations at the university. To best determine the course of action, the committee decided that the first step was to identify minority needs and the way students viewed intergroup relations. Initially undergraduate students were selected as the target group, but as instrument design progressed, committee members realized the importance of obtaining the perceptions of graduate students, faculty, and administrators as well. The purpose of this paper is to present the development and refinement of the student instrument and its modification for other groups. The final instrument that was administered to students was a result of planning meetings that were held with nearly 30 student groups, committee meetings, and field tests. Results from the three instruments (administered to undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty and administrators) are briefly presented along with committee recommendations for future steps. (BJV)

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ASSESSING RACIAL ATTITUDES IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the

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Prepared by:

Wei Li Fang, Ph.D.
Robert W. Covert, Ph.D.
Vanessa Eslinger, Ph.D.
Ronald J. Stump, Ph.D.

Direct correspondence to: Wei Li Fang, Ph.D., Office of Medical Education, Box 382, U.Va. Medical Center, Charlottesville, VA 22908 (804/924-2563).

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Abstract

Although the University of Virginia is a state-supported institution, only 8% of the students are black and less than 1% of the faculty are black. This underrepresentation of minorities has been a concern to the university community in recent years. During the summer of 1986, an ad hoc committee of students, faculty, and administrators was formed, with the goal of increasing racial and multi-cultural awareness and improving race relations at the University.

To determine the best course of action, the Committee decided that the first step was to identify minority needs and how students viewed intergroup relations. Initially undergraduate students were selected as the target group, but as instrument design progressed, Committee members realized the importance of obtaining the perceptions of graduate students, faculty, and administrators as well.

The purpose of this paper is to present the development and refinement of the student instrument and its modification for other groups. The final instrument that was administered to students was a result of planning meetings that were held with nearly 30 student groups, Committee meetings, and field tests. Results from the three instruments (i.e., undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty and administrators) are briefly presented along with Committee recommendations for future steps.

The University of Virginia is a state-supported institution, in a state where 20% of the population is black. Although the University has made efforts to increase the number of black students and faculty, only 6.5% of the students are black and 1.8% of the faculty are black.[1] This underrepresentation of minorities has been a concern to students and faculty alike in recent years. Demonstrations sponsored by black student groups have made it clear to the administration that more active measures needed to be taken in the areas of recruitment and retention. Partly in response to student activism and demands, President Robert O'Neil appointed a 16-member Task Force on Afro-American Affairs during the fall of 1986. Their mission was to define "an institutional policy designed to promote integration and enhance the educational opportunities of Afro-American students at the University,"[2] and they were asked to report to him by June 1 of this year.

During the summer of 1986, an ad hoc committee, the Group for Improving Race Relations (GIRR), met. Comprised of students, faculty, and administrators, these individuals were interested in improving race relations at the University. While there is some overlap in membership of the Task Force and GIRR, the goals of the two have been somewhat different. In the case of the Task Force, their mission was to conduct a study within a specified period of time. GIRR, on the other hand, is interested in increasing racial awareness and in improving race relations over time. While the Task Force has concentrated on issues primarily of concern to blacks, GIRR has a broader perspective, which is to encompass individuals of all ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

In order to develop programs and activities appropriate to identified needs, GIRR decided that the first step was to conduct a formal assessment of the University's racial environment. Two surveys were proposed. The purpose of the first survey was to identify ongoing projects and resources at the University which addressed racial, ethnic, or multicultural concerns. Based on responses to this survey, a directory of resource people and programs was printed and distributed throughout the University.

The purpose of the second survey was to determine how students viewed intergroup relations. Initially undergraduate students were selected as the target group, but as instrument design and development progressed, GIRR members realized the importance of obtaining the perceptions of graduate students, teaching assistants, faculty, and administrators as well. GIRR also recognized the need for institutional backing and approached the Provost's office for financial assistance and general support. This was obtained during the 1986-87 academic year.

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the development and refinement of the student survey and its modification for other University groups. What follows is a description of instrument development and field testing; administration of the surveys; and a brief summary of the results and recommendations.

Development of the Surveys

To ensure that the work of GIRR was completed in a timely manner, Dr. Vanessa Eslinger was hired as coordinator. Her role was key in the development, administration, analysis, and interpretation of the surveys.

An interaction approach was used to develop the undergraduate, graduate, and faculty/administrator perception surveys. Initially, undergraduate students were targeted as respondents; consequently, Dr. Eslinger contacted student organizations and met with interested representatives to develop items for inclusion on the survey. Two dozen organizations participated in the survey's development and represented diverse groups such as the Black Greek Affairs Executive Council, the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation Student Board, the Chinese Student Association, the Indian Student Association, and the Office of International Student Affairs.

Throughout this series of meetings, participants expressed minority and intergroup concerns, suggested survey items, and critiqued preliminary drafts of the instrument. This usually meant that Dr. Eslinger met with groups on more than one occasion. These interactions accomplished two purposes: they ensured diverse contributions in the identification and assessment of pertinent minority and intergroup relations issues, and they served as a means to build the participants' expectations for reviewing and responding to the results of the survey. However, these expectations also implied that the turnaround time between the administration of surveys and the reporting of results to participating groups had to be expeditious.

Final drafts were then field tested for reliability and validity. Several of the monthly GIRR meetings were devoted to instrument review and critique. Members made changes with respect to clarity of language, organizational format, and item additions and deletions. The survey was also administered to graduate students in the Darden School of Business and an undergraduate class in the Curry School of Education. Responses from the graduate students indicated that a separate instrument was needed for graduate students since their experiences and concerns were somewhat different from those of the undergraduates. The undergraduate students were asked to complete the survey twice, in order to establish consistency of response over time (i.e., a one-week time interval). Following the second administration of the questionnaire, content and face validity were established by asking respondents to orally interpret the survey's directions and items. This was particularly useful in determining whether respondents understood the purported intent of the items.

As a result of the pilot tests, minor modifications in the final undergraduate survey were made. The development of the undergraduate survey took approximately two months. In light of the number of organizations that were involved, this was relatively quick. It also points to the importance of having one person responsible for the overall coordination of the development process.

During the development of the undergraduate instrument, it became clear that a separate survey needed to be developed for graduate students. This questionnaire consisted of some of the same items as the undergraduate survey so that comparisons could be made. It also includes items pertaining specifically to graduate students and eliminated items pertaining specifically to undergraduate students.

A similar process was implemented during the development of the graduate student and faculty/administrator surveys. Again, relevant student and faculty organizations or groups were contacted and asked to offer their suggestions, and GIRR members reviewed preliminary and final drafts for item clarity and appropriateness. Whenever relevant, items on the graduate and faculty surveys were matched with those on the undergraduate questionnaire or reworded in a correlative manner so that comparisons might be made across response groups.

Administration of the Surveys

As noted previously, GIRR is comprised of representatives from each of the University's ten schools. Consequently, representatives volunteered to take responsibility for survey distribution and collection within their schools. This meant obtaining the dean's support and signature on the accompanying cover letter in each school. However, Dr. Eslinger was responsible for the delivery and pick-up of surveys to each of the schools.

At the time of the survey, there were 11,249 undergraduate students, 5,736 graduate students, and 1,796 full and part-time teaching/administrative faculty members. Each person received a questionnaire and thus had an opportunity to participate. The rate of response was seen as a gauge of interest.

Undergraduate questionnaires were distributed at the end of the 1986 fall semester, in conjunction with the distribution and collection of students' schedule request forms for the 1987 spring semester. The School of Commerce, however, administered the survey during the second week of spring semester. To increase the number of respondents, questionnaires were redistributed in contract dining areas and dormitories by members of Alpha Phi Omega fraternity, the Residence Life staff, and First Year Council.

Graduate student and faculty/administrator surveys were distributed in mailboxes or by University mail during the spring of 1987. GIRR members made the necessary arrangements for return of the completed surveys, and these were then picked up by Dr. Eslinger.

Results and Recommendations

Demographic Information

Undergraduate survey responses were received from 2,089 students, or 19% of the total undergraduate student population. This included 1,722 Caucasian students, 195 Afro-American students, 152 students of other racial/ethnic/ cultural affiliation, and 20 students who did not indicate their racial identification. The response rate was greatest for first-year students and dropped with each succeeding class.

Sixteen percent of the total graduate student population (i.e., 928 graduate students) responded to the survey. This group consisted of 809 Caucasians, 37 Afro-Americans, 70 other, and 12 who did not report their race/ ethnicity.

A total of 769 faculty members and administrators (i.e., 43% of the faculty population) completed questionnaires. This included 714 Caucasians, 18 Afro-Americans, 29 members of other racial/ethnic backgrounds, and 8 who did not specify their race/ethnicity.

Major Findings and Conclusions

The data were analyzed by frequency/percentage of responses in each of the categories of items on the three surveys. Categories included general; student-faculty-staff interaction; student-student interaction; faculty-faculty interaction; curriculum; and institutional policies, procedures, and administrative supports. Comparisons across groups were made between responses of Caucasians, Afro-Americans, and members of other racial/ethnic/ cultural groups.

Once the results were interpreted and summarized, Dr. Eslinger contacted the student and faculty organizations who had participated in the development of the surveys. She reviewed the rssults and discussed them with these representatives. Response to a discussion of the results was favorable, and some of the organizations are currently preparing plans as to how they will address concerns that were identified in the survey.

In the final report and during the public release of results, GIRR made it clear that findings were not generalizable beyond the group of respondents. One must remember that response rates were 19% for undergraduates, 16% for graduate students, and 43% for faculty and administrators. It is heartening to see that the response rate for this third group is fairly high and indicates their level of interest in racial, ethnic, and multicultural issues.

The survey investigated a wide spectrum of minority and intergroup issues. These were identified and included on the basis of input obtained from members of the University community during the early stages of development of the survey instruments. The fact that numerous student and faculty organizations chose to participate in the process seemed, in itself, to suggest a high level of interest in, and support for, minority-majority

concerns at the University of Virginia. This conclusion was corroborated by the survey findings which revealed that across all response groups, percentages ranged from 74-100% in agreement with the statement, "Racial concerns should be a high priority at the University." In addition, 56-89% of respondents across groups agreed with the statement, "I would be interested in attending seminars, workshops, etc., designed to further my understanding of diverse ethnic or cultural groups. Nearly everyone (92-100%) indicated that they valued cross-racial/cultural interaction.

Recommendations

Specific recommendations fell into four categories: training, curriculum analysis, continued surveying, and monitoring and coordination. First, it was suggested that all administrators, faculty, and staff be exposed to some initial training that sensitized them to the issue of race relations in a systematic fashion. This training could include the results of the student and faculty survey for the purpose of better understanding the racial attitudes at the University of Virginia. Once completed, it would then be followed by regular additional training on an annual basis.

Second, it was recommended that each school and/or department assess their own curriculum to determine the extent that alternative curriculum perspectives were adequately presented. GIRR members would serve as resources and develop a curriculum analysis procedure. Once this procedure was validated, GIRR members would work with faculty committees from various departments to implement the curriculum analysis. Departments would benefit in the following ways: (1) they would have an increased knowledge of multicultural components of their curriculum; (2) an explicit message to minority and majority faculty and students would be sent, that the inclusion of multicultural issues was of departmental concern; and (3) through action, they would demonstrate a commitment to the importance of viewing the content of a discipline in a broader light. An additional benefit of the process might be an increased emphasis of multicultural aspects of the courses and curricula in the written course and catalog descriptions.

Third, it was recommended that staff at the University of Virginia be surveyed, using a process similar to the one utilized for the student and faculty questionnaires. Representatives of the staff would be invited to participate in GIRR and in the development of the survey.

Fourth, it was recommended that efforts in the area of race relations be coordinated, monitored, and evaluated. Strategies would need to be developed to ensure that training and curriculum analysis activities mesh with other activities currently underway at the University and that the implemented activities are appropriately evaluated. In order to achieve this recommendation, a coordinator would have to be hired. This person could use the existing GIRR as an advisory board. Responsibilities of the position would include the development and implementation of a variety of training programs; development, field testing, and supervision of implementation of a curriculum analysis procedure; coordination of programs within different schools and central administration; evaluation of programs; and reporting to the University community on the progress of these programs. The data which

are collected during monitoring and evaluation can be used for improving the program and for informing others as to the program's progress and effectiveness. Results from the current set of surveys can serve as baseline data for monitoring the overall change in racial attitudes over time. Biannual administration of racial attitude surveys could be undertaken to assess University progress in this area.

In conclusion, the Group on Improving Race Relations has completed an extensive survey of students and faculty on race relations. The survey represents a culmination of efforts, from diverse sources. Use of an interaction process was crucial in the survey's design.

Essential to the development and administration of the questionnaire was the hiring of a coordinator who had extensive training in the area of instrument design and evaluation methodology. Her diligence in working with groups to identify and field test items and in meeting imposed deadlines made her the linchpin around which the work revolved.

This survey represents a first step in reaching GIRR's goal--to improve race relations at the University of Virginia. Results from the questionnaire are both promising and realistic, promising in the sense that there was consistent agreement across groups that race relations should be a priority at the University, and realistic in that they showed differences across racial groups on attitudes or perceptions about University policies and programs.

References

1. Harris W: Percentage of blacks in U.Va. job categories (fall, 1986).

2. Task Force on Afro-American Affairs: Letter to the faculty. November 15, 1986.